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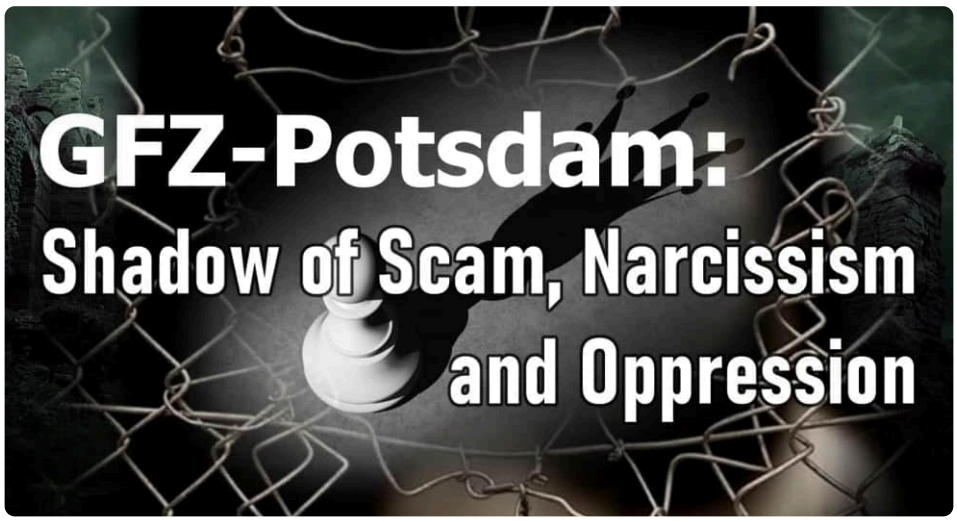

GFZ-Potsdam: Shadow of Scam, Narcissism and Oppression

GFZ-Potsdam: Scam? Narcissism? Oppression?

Younes Fadakar Alghalandis
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In April 2024, I received a formal appointment as a Research Scientist under a three-year contract for the position of:

Postdoctoral Researcher (f_m_x) for Workbench for Digital Geosystems

(https://www.gfz-potsdam.de/karriere/stellenangebote/details/9491)

at GFZ-Potsdam, department of Geosystems, subsection 4.5. However, only a month into the job, I had to leave the institution in May due to several instances of disrespect, oppression, and mismanagement. Since early July, the same position has been advertised once again. Given my experiences, I believe that sharing my story could be beneficial for anyone considering joining GFZ-Potsdam in the future.

Part 1 - Before arriving in Potsdam, Germany

On Feb 7th, I had an interview with Magdalena Scheck-Wenderoth (**Leni**) and **Mauro** Cacace. I presented my previous projects on related subjects such as digital twins, code development, numerical modeling, meshing and visualization. This online video-conference lasted over an hour.

On Feb 15th, I received an offer via email:

"...We are pleased to inform you that your qualification profile suits best the job profile we are looking for. Therefore you were ranked as number 1 and we would like to offer you the position as a postdoctoral research scientist in the project Building a digital workbench for geoscientific subsurface applications...", "...also let us know your possible starting date at GFZ..."

On Feb 16th, I accepted the email (unofficial) offer and replied:

"…A possible starting date at GFZ would be a few weeks after receiving the official offer…"

On Feb 20th, they wrote: *"…We have planned the starting date for 15th March…".*

I was astonished and thoroughly perplexed due to the fact that the official offer usually takes several weeks to arrive, yet their plan for March 15th seemed unreasonable; furthermore, they seemingly overlooked my statement in the email of Feb 16 ("a few weeks after receiving the official offer"). Nonetheless, I reached out to the Welcome Center to gather more information about procedures and possibilities while keeping them informed. It was discovered that mid-April could be the earliest possible start date if everything proceeds exceptionally smoothly on their (German) end. Additionally, for this to occur, I had to expedite my planning and arrangements immediately: reserving flights, lodging, appointments, and more in Germany, as well as arrangements in Canada before embarking on an overseas journey.

In actuality, this meant that I needed to pay a higher price for booking flights and accommodations, and to dedicate the entire month of March to communicating and handling several crucial arrangements, including those with German governmental offices and others.

Part 2 - After arriving in Potsdam

After putting in significant effort and making some sacrifices on my side, I arrived in Potsdam in early April to attend appointments with the German government for residency and with other offices: insurance, bank, mobile, and more. A lot of paperwork was involved, along with numerous day-long queues and waiting periods. Eventually, thanks to understanding and assistance provided by the Immigration Office in Potsdam, I could finally start my job in mid-April.

Part 3 – Starting the job at GFZ-Potsdam

On April 15th, my first day of employment, I made my way to the office. Upon entering my office, I found some documents (guidelines, job description, etc.) left on my desk for review.

Discrepancy

Upon generous reading this **after-hire-provided job description**, I discovered a big discrepancy. This several-page document prepared by Mauro was entirely solely focused on THM and had no reasonable relevance to the **main parts of the advertised** and **discussed position** or **any field of expertise I possessed**. This realization left me perplexed and disheartened, given that this was my first hour on the job. **Was the whole thing a scam, miscommunication? Why?**

- Had I known the details of this job prior to applying, I would not have considered it, nor would I have accepted an offer for such an alien after-hire-provided job description.

Extremely let down, yet considering the investment of efforts, energy, and expenses, I had no alternative but to adapt myself to this undesirable situation. I began intensively studying THM and practicing with their in-house, entirely undocumented code, Golem. By about a week later, I was familiar with the source code, its unnecessarily complicated and drawn-out compilation, modification, and execution process. I even compiled a concise document summarizing every step I learned and then shared it with the team. Since I didn't know Mauro and Leni, I hoped for positive personalities from them as compensation for my disappointment. **How naive that hope turned out to be!**

Hostile Work Environment

Mauro was absent throughout the first week, after which I realized through brief conversations with both Leni and Mauro that something seemed suspicious about my hiring. They showed no interest in my expertise or experiences, at all. **So why did they hire me in the first place?**

In the second week, during a group meeting, we listened to a live presentation by a renowned Chinese expert who had recently published an intriguing discovery in Nature. Suddenly, Leni ordered the presentation to be halted, claiming she understood only 5% due to the accent. Despite not being an expert in THM, I was able to comprehend the presentation reasonably well. Leni's comment and action were inappropriate. Indeed, it was another indication that something was amiss. I noticed it then but hoped for better experiences in the days to come. Unfortunately, I myself soon became a target of destructive vague criticism and series of disrespectful behavior by both Leni and Mauro.

Disrespects, Destructive Statements

Early May, I informed Mauro in my office that I wanted to be fully prepared for the upcoming meeting in Aachen. He stated that there was nothing to prepare for; it was merely an introductory meeting, and we could discuss more about it during the train ride. In the third week of my job, Mauro and I took a train from Berlin to Aachen (a seven-hour journey) to attend the kickoff meeting for the major project led by RWTH. As soon as we boarded the train, Mauro began talking about the **probation period and termination** for nearly an hour. I was taken aback and deeply annoyed, but I tried to remain composed as we were en route to a meeting of the significant project. I suggested that he discuss the meeting, the project; then he realized he had forgotten to send me any documents related to the big project.

- Throughout the first, third, and fourth weeks, I never had a chance to meet Mauro as he was away from his office. During the second week, we only had brief conversations. Even when I invited him to come to my office, he seemed hesitant.
- The apparent lack of interest shown by Mauro was annoying.

Aachen

In Aachen, we met the project members, and each person gave a brief introduction. When it was my turn, I concluded by stating, "I hope that my expertise will be helpful to this project." Mauro then replied, "We'll see." I felt deeply disrespected and publicly teased by his unprofessional comment in front of newly-met professionals. Although annoyed, I

maintained my composure and actively participated in the meeting activities. I attentively listened to each person's presentation and shared my knowledge on related topics.

Unlike the alien after-hire-provided job description at GFZ-Potsdam, **the big project was entirely within my area of expertise and interests**, and was also aligned well with the content of the original job advertisement. Indeed, to address the main questions and needs of the big project and partners, I had clear answers and practical solutions readily available that could save months. During the meeting, I shared a brief, gentle description with the project leaders about my previous similar works in digital twins, interfaces, meshing, and visualizations - all key milestones of the big project, also mentioned in their public announcements.

The meeting lasted longer than anticipated, but we had a return train to catch. It was only a few minutes before our scheduled departure when I informed Mauro that it was time to leave. He ignored me repeatedly; a few minutes later, I decided to depart, so I shook hands and rushed to the train station. Mauro did not accompany me. Despite feeling pain in my legs from running, I managed to board the train just in time.

The return ticket included change of train in Koln (Cologne). Once I arrived in Koln's station, found the assigned platform for the train to Berlin and sat down for a minute. Just a few minutes to departure, Mauro appeared before me suddenly, saying that the train had been changed. I asked Mauro, "*Why are you ignoring me?*" He shouted at and blamed me. I asked him "***Is this how the next three years will be?***"

After many hours of traveling via train and bus, I finally arrived home past midnight. Knowing that taxi expenses would not be reimbursed and GFZ-Potsdam does not cover any payment for after hours or nights, I had no choice but to use public transportation.

In the next days, the situation gradually worsened and escalated into various forms of disrespect and oppression towards me in the workplace.

- - - - - - - - - - email - - - - - - - - - -

14.05.2024 @ 11:35 PM - From: Younes - To: V - CC: Leni

Dear V,

This morning, D came to my office saying that he has been asked to move the PhD student, M's Desk etc temporarily (for a few weeks or months) here to my office. While I was surprised of not being consulted or informed beforehand, I helped him to do that, anyway.

Note that, M is a nice guy, and this email is not about him whatsoever. It is ultimately a matter of the department management, for sure; however what is surely missing and I am slightly not happy about it is: not being consulted / informed beforehand.

Best, Younes

- - - - - - - - - - end of email - - - - - - - - - -

Minutes later V came to my office and apologized for not informing me beforehand. I thanked V and concluded the matter closed.

Overreaction, Blame Shifting and Oppression

A few hours later, however, I received the following false and disturbing email from Leni:

- - - - - - - - - - email - - - - - - - - - -

14.05.2024 @ 1:37 PM - From: Magdalena - To: Younes

Dear Yuones,

sorry to hear you were surprised. We had mentioned that M would temporarily move into your room at the last section meeting though and you had signaled agreement if I remember correctly. So I am also a bit surprised about this harsh reaction of yours. There were a few more people in the room at the section meeting when we spoke about this and I'm sure we can clarify what went wrong. If the way this was discussed was leading to any misunderstanding we may want to think about how to improve and avoid it next time.

I hope you are aware that your current room is planned for 2-3 people and we cannot afford having single rooms on the long term. If there are periods when less people are here in between, it is the exception but not the rule.

Finally, the information that the painting team comes today came on short notice to all of us this morning, we just knew it would happen within the next weeks. Thus the planning ahead for today was basically not possible. We had to sort out things rather quickly despite M being on holiday and you not in the office yet. I understand that this may have been unpleasant for you but be sure it was not intended to offend.

We usually communicate in a very constructive, respectful and open-minded mode and I expect this to be the standard. Attacking the department management before even searching a conversation in this way is definitely not part of our culture and I hope you can change your ways here.

Best regards, Leni

- - - - - - - - - - end of email - - - - - - - - - -

Leni's message was a mixture of false statements, apology and blame shifting. It is called "blame-shifting apology" which is insincere, very destructive, and a sign of narcissistic behavior.

I responded:

- - - - - - - - - - email - - - - - - - - - -

14.05.2024 @ 2:07 PM - From: Younes - To: Magdalena - CC: V

Dear Leni,

I was not expecting a response from you as V came to my office and explained it nicely and briefly already.

Since you wrote I have a duty to respond, I think.

I do not recall any discussion with me on this beforehand whatsoever, not in the last section meeting nor elsewhere, hence, your first statement is not true.

Your second paragraph was not and is not of my concern.

And for your last statement, my email is written professionally and is very mindful and respectful. Your interpretation of it as "Attacking..." is overreacting and disturbing.

I exercise high level of respect in all of my actions and expect the same from you, and everyone else.

Best Regards, Younes

- - - - - - - - - - end of email - - - - - - - - - -

A minute later, Leni stormed into my office unannounced, visibly agitated, and immediately shouted at me, “What’s the problem?” I attempted to calm her down by saying that any issues had been resolved after V visited my office earlier that morning. I also pointed out that her (Leni's) email was inappropriate and distressing. Leni deflected responsibility by saying that she did not know that V has talked to me earlier. I reminded her that my email was to V (Leni was only cc’ed), hence, it was on Leni to consult with V (Leni’s assistant) before responding to me. Leni refused to relent and continued shouting she decides if there is a problem. Leni’s behavior **was frustrating and demoralizing for me**.

The following day, we met in Leni's office where she offered a brief apology for her email and failing to inform me about changes in my workspace. However, her apology seemed insincere as she quickly turned the meeting into another session of blame-shifting and oppression. She interrupted me multiple times and even refused to listen to parts of my concerns. Instead, she said that I should **think about the probation period seriously**, and also stated that Mauro is not going to change his behavior.

Mauro and Leni were apparently using the probation period as a subtle threat to discourage me from raising concerns or asserting myself. It was a **hostile work environment**.

Still affected by the sequence of oppression and disrespect at work by both Leni and Mauro, in the late afternoon, I prepared an email introducing myself along with some relevant documents detailing my past work accomplishments, and sent it to the project team members, hoping to counteract the mounting sense of disrespect, oppression, and narcissism at GFZ-Potsdam.

However, the very next morning, Leni sent a frivolous termination email. I then briefly met with the Head of HR, Beate, who stated that the termination during probation was final.

And I left.

Closing Remarks

Taking into account these events, it seems likely that the termination was pre-planned even before I started the job, with the only exception being if I had chosen to act as a 100% people-pleaser, more precisely Leni-pleaser. The main goal appeared to be securing funding from the ministry, for which they consumed me.

This unfortunate experience was very costly to me in many ways.

Unfortunately, there is a significant gap in employment law that allows employers to exploit employees for several months without serious legal consequences by using a malicious excuse of "probation". This loophole is often misused by some employers to violate even human and civil rights of their employees.

It is crucial that we amplify our collective voice to drive meaningful change. Your support in sharing this article will not only help spread awareness but also empower others who may be facing similar situations. Together, we can shine a light on these dark practices and hold those responsible accountable. Please share this article widely. Your voice matters—let it resonate far and wide.

[Author: Younes, Published on July 25th, 2024]

Younes Fadakar Alghalandis 1d

Crucial Update: For a detailed account of the escalating retaliation, the HR misconduct, and the official demands for accountability and reform, please read the follow-up article published in November 2025. The full scope of the injustice is documented there.

GFZ-Potsdam: UNRECHT Exposed WIDERSTAND

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/gfz-potsdam-unrecht-exposed-widerstand-younes-fadakar-alghalandis-8rm7e

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Younes Fadakar Alghalandis 1d

Summary: In his LinkedIn article, Younes Fadakar Alghalandis recounts his brief and traumatic tenure as a postdoctoral researcher in GFZ-Potsdam's Geosystems department, where he accepted a three-year position in April 2024 only to resign a month later amid a toxic environment of disrespect, mismanagement, and betrayal. Despite his specialized expertise in digital twins and numerical modeling, he was abruptly reassigned solely to undiscussed THM modeling tasks, facing public humiliation, blame-shifting, and veiled threats from supervisors Magdalena Scheck-Wenderoth and Mauro Cacace during his probationary period; his attempts to voice concerns led to swift termination. Fadakar portrays this as emblematic of broader institutional issues at GFZ, including narcissistic leadership, exploitation of probation loopholes, opaque hiring practices, and a culture of oppression that preys on vulnerable international scholars, calling on others to share their stories to foster accountability and reform.

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Catalin Teodoriu 1y

definitely a horror story from Germany which I have incline to believe. I am wondering if anyone from Potsdam will bother leaving a comment

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Helge Kreutz 1y

Sorry to say, but your story reads as if you have been a little inexperienced in expatriate work and got yourself into a personal conflict with 2 of your new colleagues.

Here are a few hints:
1. When you are asked about your starting date, the answer is "As soon as I have received all required documentation from you." Put the pressure on them.
2. Your longhaul flight to the office is your first business trip in your new job. They either pay for it or something is fishy.
3. When you arrive in the country, you are entitled to a few days of admin, to ensure that you become a legal alien.
4. You might be long expected, but the office is not going to change for your arrival. It is you that has to find his way in. Being initially overlooked or forgotten is absolutely normal untill you have made your point by delivering a contribution that gets noticed and remembered.
5. Sounds like you were getting impatient too early. It is normal that you are first surprised by a different, unexpected culture/working environment. But never, ever express that, because there is nothing you can do to change it. Wait 3 months and you will know how to work it.
6. Never judge an organisation by your experience with 2 of its employees.

Like · Reply | 2 Reactions

Joachim Strobel 1y

Many years ago, I was sitting with my HR manager discussing whether to hire the person we had just interviewed. I was unsure and mentioned that we could hire the person and use the probationary period as a test. The HR person replied angrily and emphatically that a probationary period was not an extra check-out period and would only be executed if the person committed a crime or otherwise. I was told that HR expected me to be able to judge a person on the basis of the interview and that it would reflect badly on me if I used the probationary period as a substitute for poor judgement.
This was a German company. I think those companies still exist. HR's opinion was and is 100% correct.

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